

# Music

Many times when I've been wearing headphones someone would approach me making hand gestures and face movements to indicate that they want to ask a question. When I remove the headphones I find that the question is "What kind of music is it?"

When I reply that I'm listening to an audiobook the inquisitor repeats "Yeah but what kind of music is it?"

I've had far too many of these kinds of conversations.

"I'm listening to an audiobook"

"But what kind of music is it?"

"It isn't music, it's an audiobook".

"Yeah but I only wanna know.... What kind of music is it?"

"It's a book. I'm listening to a book. Read by an actor. A book. An audiobook. Not music. Words. Written words. In a book. Read by an actor as an audio performance of a book".

"Yeah but what kind of music is it?"

"Oh hell! Forget it! It's World Music".

"What?"

"Oh never mind... For pity's sake!!!"

I'm constantly baffled by the average English person's apparent inability to understand simple English.

Years ago I told someone at work that I hoped Barack Obama would get the Democratic Party nomination for president. The person I said that to went all around the workplace telling people that I wanted "Osama" to be the American president.

When I said to some idiot (not the same one) at work that I was reading a book by Herman Hesse he went around telling everyone that I was reading Rudolf Hess.

I have the misfortune of meeting these sort of idiots everywhere I go. Not just here in Exeter but in places like London and Sheffield too.

Anyway. I started writing this page with the title "MUSIC" and I've wandered away from the topic already. I have a lot of pent-up anger.

## Music.

I was born in the 1950s and grew up thinking of rock music and pop music as the normal background noise of my world. Elderly teachers at school thought that pop music was the very devil itself, it seemed. But my mum liked Cliff and the Shadows.

I got interested in jazz because of jazzy theme music on television programmes. The Avengers, The Saint, Mission Impossible. There was an American show called "Route 66"

which was about two fellas in a sportscar travelling across America and having an adventure in every town. The theme music was by Nelson Riddle and his Orchestra and somehow the arrangement of that music fascinated me. The rhythm was doing a per-diddily-diddily motif while the orchestra would periodically swell up and then fade back down again, giving the impression of signs and buildings the car might pass on the freeway. Looming up and then disappearing in the rear view mirror.

We had a class in junior school called "Music and Movement". It was based on a BBC radio programme of the same name. It got us all into the habit of interpreting musical sounds in our imagination and in terms of movement. Characters could be created with a rhythm and some types of sound.

As we grew up we learned to apply this imaginative language of music as a means of understanding what composers were trying to do. Gustav Holst painting a picture in sound of the Solar System for instance.

In secondary school it was different. The music teacher didn't want to teach us because we were all rough uncouth working class kids. She refused to take us and so we had to use our own intelligence to make sense of the current music of the day.

The 1960s were coming to an end and Rock was beginning to be "heavy" and "progressive". There was a failed plot at my school which had wanted to get the headmaster to play "In the Court of the Crimson King" at morning assembly. What little rascals we were.

Hippies and Rock fans I talked to in the 70s and over the various decades since then almost always seem to feel a need to know every little detail about the music they like. They always look at me with contempt because I like a band but I don't know who played bass in the line-up or I like a song but I don't know the name of the band that was playing it. I get further contempt because I'm not a fan of any particular genre of music.

I'll listen to all kinds of music and find good and bad in every style. The music I've enjoyed includes Jazz, Rock, Blues, Hip Hop, Classical, Romantic, Dubstep, World Music, Folk, Medieval or "Early" music, Reggae, Ska, Calypso, Swing and Experimental. I don't like Country & Western (but even there I can think of exceptions).

My objection to Country and Western is that the C.I.A. created a fake music style from the late 1940s onwards by distorting genuine American Folk Music and by artificially grafting in 1930s Hollywood Cowboy Songs in a manoeuvre to steer people away from the Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and Workers' Rights movement. The objective of Country and Western was to trick low paid American workers into fighting against their own chances of a better life. They were given sentimentality about Mom and Church and Booze and The Flag and the Western tradition of cattle exploitation. In exchange for these icons of deception what was taken away from American Workers was their right to complain about capitalist big business polluting the land and impoverishing the people. The workers had been colonised as surely as the native North American tribal culture had before them.

This kind of manipulation of the public consciousness isn't new. The British were doing a similar thing somewhere around a hundred years ago when the BBC began to present the

folk music of the British Isles in a cleaned-up, respectable sort of way. The school system in England did the same thing. Folk music of England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland was presented as jolly little sing-songs and nursery rhymes which were no threat to the stability of what used to be called the British Empire. When I was growing up in the 1960s there was an Irish singer called Patrick O'Hagan who appeared on BBC television on a Sunday afternoon singing Irish songs such as "Cockles and Mussels" or "Oh Danny Boy" but he sang these songs while wearing formal evening dress and standing in a very straight and upright posture next to the grand piano which provided his accompaniment.

Folk was treated like a museum artifact, to be dusted off and displayed for historical purposes.

Thank the gods in their various heavens that Folk Rock emerged to save us all from artificially imposed respectability.

I think Jazz also lost its way several times in the quest for "respectability". Look at the Hollywood film "High Society" or look up Miles Davis' comments about Wynton Marsalis being too "straight" and "confused".

In the 1950s some Jazz musicians were looking to a more formalised approach which consciously used a modal form of metamorphing the chords based on their position in a sequence. Others have rebelled against the formalism and turned instead towards total expressive experimentation in sound.

In "High Society" Louis Armstrong gives us a strong clue about the future direction of music by singing the song in a Caribbean calypso style.

To escape from the straitjacket of respectability it seems to be necessary to have heroes arise who will show us the way. Music is liberated by the arrival of heroes like Herbie Hancock, James Brown, Fela Kuti, Manu Dibango, Amy Winehouse, Lauryn Hill.

Paul McCartney says that John Lennon started getting "nasty" in the latter days of the Beatles. But without that nastiness the Beatles would've ended in blandness. Boat rockers are necessary.

Here's a note that I wrote in response to Toby Litt's piece about "Hearing the Chords". Toby was comparing writing to music and talking about there being the equivalent of musical chords in a writing style.

"I get bored with music genres very quickly. I've always felt this way. Ever since childhood I'll jump between chord based popular music, modal jazz, twelve tone classical, minimalism, atonal sound art, big bands, small bands, Japanese music, Indian, Chinese, Celtic, Spanish or movie soundtracks or whatever. Sometimes I love SILENCE for very extended periods.

When I was a schoolboy in the 60s I had a Pink Floyd single of "See Emily Play" and I got bored with it so I swapped it to another boy at school in exchange for his E.P. of steam train sound effects.

I've spent a lot of time listening to sound effects the way other people listen to music. I was born in the fifties so a lot of my contemporaries are rock fans or mods or hippies. They are often totally immersed in power chord based music. They scorn my listening choices. They tell me that listening to jazz and hip hop makes no sense to them.

I often like discords or sequences of individual notes.

I like György Ligeti and Duke Ellington and Yoko Kanno.

Transferring the idea of chords from music to writing, I think, courts populism and risks cliché.

In a technical sense though the equivalent concept in painting would be palette I think.

The popular song writer builds the whole palette of his work from the broad tones/chords. This is equivalent to the type of painting which relies heavily on three or four strong colours. Sets a mood. Like all the illustrations accompanying a "noir" crime novel or the bright primary and secondary colours of all the children's books about caterpillars. But as there are many different types of palette in visual art so I think music and literature also deserve more diversity of tones. More subtlety and unexpected note progressions.

I have a tremendous hatred of "smooth" jazz. I love jazz. Jazz should be rough and boisterous, seldom smooth and if ever smooth then that should be the calm before the storm.

There's that feeling of escape.

Running away from the slave owners who try to chain you and beat you.

Get away. Get away. Put a jinx upon the pursuers and a jinx upon their hunting dogs.

Take an unexpected turn on a sixpence and disappear from their infernal radar screens.

Blow with the wind and beat it.

If it isn't strange what good is it at all?

The chords are all very well but we need the shocks, the discords and the unexpected witchery glitchery."

Pop music worries me in recent years.

There was a time when songwriters could write about any subject they liked. There were songs about love, anger, adventure, dogs, cats, life, death, science, science fiction, horror, irony, freedom, history, hope, despair, religion, politics, war, peace, gardens, surrealism, the ocean, the mountains, flowers, fashion, television, food, theatre, cars motorbikes, pushbikes, enigmas, weather, writing, books, dancing, school, being old, being young, motherhood,

fatherhood, violence, drinking, tea, coffee, furniture, technology, prison, crime, cartoons, heroes, villains, rivers and cake.

In recent years it has seemed to me that pop music took a turning into a corridor which gets narrower and narrower as it goes along. The subjects which songwriters will now write about have been narrowed down to mainly relationships, sad relationships, good relationships, and tragic break-ups. I seldom hear a new song in pop that deals with any other subject.

The corridor seems to have become so narrow now that any song which doesn't talk about bad relationships and tragic break-ups is probably not going to be included under the category of "Pop".

I think there needs to be a new renaissance in songwriting.